



## **Bowel cancer in Australia**

### **Fact sheet - June 2017**

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#### **How common is bowel cancer in Australia?**

- In 2017, bowel cancer is estimated to be the second most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australia. (behind breast cancer)
- In 2017, it is estimated that 16,682 (9,127 men and 7,555 women) new cases of bowel cancer will be diagnosed in Australia.
- In 2017, it is estimated that the risk of an individual being diagnosed with bowel cancer by their 85<sup>th</sup> birthday will be 1 in 13 (1 in 11 in males and 1 in 15 females).

#### **Deaths from bowel cancer**

- In 2017, it is estimated that 4,114 (2,136 men and 1,978 women) will die from bowel cancer in Australia.
- Bowel cancer will be the second most common cause of cancer death in Australia. (behind lung cancer) in 2017, representing 8.6% of all cancer related deaths.
- In 2017, it is estimated that the risk of an individual dying from bowel cancer by their 85<sup>th</sup> birthday will be 1 in 54 (1 in 47 males and 1 in 63 females).

#### **Survival from bowel cancer**

- In 2009-2013, individuals diagnosed with bowel cancer had a 69% chance (68% for men and 69% for women) of surviving for 5 years compared to their counterparts in the general Australian population.
- Between 1984-1988 and 2009-2013, the 5-year survival rate from bowel cancer improved from 50% to 69%.

#### **Bowel cancer risk factors**

Both men and women are at risk of developing bowel cancer. The risk is greater if you:

- are aged 50 years and over – your risk increases with age
- have had an inflammatory bowel disease, such as Crohn disease or ulcerative colitis
- have previously had special types of polyps, called adenomas, in the bowel
- have a significant family history of bowel cancer or polyps.

Other risk factors include:

- Excess body fat and physical inactivity
- High intake of particular foods (such as processed meat)
- High alcohol consumption
- Smoking
- Some gene mutations.

Anyone, including younger people, with concerns about their risk of developing bowel cancer should talk to their doctor.

## What you can do about bowel cancer

### Reduce your risk

Your lifestyle choices can make a big difference to your risk for bowel cancer.

Cancer Australia recommends:

- not smoking, to lower your risk of cancer.
- If alcoholic drinks are consumed:
  - for men, limit your intake to no more than two standard drinks each day
  - for women, further limit your intake to one standard drink to reduce cancer risk.
- aiming for 5 serves of vegetables and 2 serves of fruit every day, eating foods high in fibre, including unprocessed cereals (grains) and pulses (legumes), and limiting your intake of red meat and processed meat to lower your risk of cancer.
- achieving and maintaining a healthy body weight within a BMI range of 18.5 to 25 kg/m<sup>2</sup> to lower your risk of cancer, and achieving and maintaining a waist circumference of:
  - for men: below 94 cm (37 in)
  - for women: below 80 cm (31.5 in)
- aiming for at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity every day, and limiting sedentary habits, such as watching television, to lower your risk of cancer.

### Know the symptoms of bowel cancer

The most common symptoms of bowel cancer are:

- bleeding from the rectum (this may be noticed as blood in the stools)
- a change in bowel habit (loose stools, constipation or stools that are narrower than usual)
- abdominal pain, cramping or bloating
- weight loss
- unexplained tiredness or fatigue.

Many conditions can cause these symptoms, not just bowel cancer. If you have any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor. Bleeding from the rectum should never be ignored.

### Participate in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

The National Bowel Screening Program (NBCSP) began in 2006. It aims to reduce illness and death from bowel cancer through early detection of the disease. The target population for the program is people aged between 50 and 74.

Bowel screening involves testing for bowel cancer in people who do not have any obvious symptoms of the disease. The aim is to find cancers early when they are easier to treat and cure. Screening can also find polyps, which may develop into cancer over time.

Bowel cancer often develops without any early warning signs. The cancer can grow on the inside wall of the bowel for several years before spreading to other parts of the body. Often very

small amounts of blood leak from these growths and pass into the bowel motion (faeces) before any symptoms are noticed.

A screening test called a Faecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) is used to collect samples of bowel motions, which are then analysed to detect tiny traces of blood, invisible to the naked eye. The screening test cannot diagnose bowel cancer, but the results will indicate whether a further test (usually a colonoscopy) is needed to rule out bowel cancer.

Bowel cancer can be treated successfully if detected in its early stages; however, fewer than 40 per cent of bowel cancers are currently detected early. Research has shown screening for bowel cancer, using an FOBT, can reduce deaths from the disease by 15-25 per cent.